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Cloak-and-dagger action: Is it worth the effort?

A wary Congress pulls on the reins

Last in a three-part series on secret operations

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Despite reports of major CIA-supported operations against Nicaragua, the Reagan administration may be doing less in the cloak-and-dagger realm than some of its officials originally planned to do.

For one thing, the capability for such action had been reduced in recent years. Then there is always the danger that a secret operation will be publicly exposed, causing greater damage to the United States than any gains that might be made.

A Senate source says that it is the latter factor as much as anything that has enabled the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, headed by Arizona Republican Barry Goldwater, to persuade the administration not to go ahead with a number of apparently risky secret operations. The Senate and House committees on intelligence do not have the right to cancel such a proposed operation, but they do have to be consulted. They also have a say over the funding for the intelligence agencies.

Reports appearing for more than a year in the US press concerning CIA-supported raids into Nicaragua may have already had an inhibiting effect on those operations. The most recent reports indicate that the Honduran Army has been dispersing some of the border camps from which former Nicaraguan national guardsmen have launched raids. It was not clear whether this action was merely temporary. One reason for it may have been to avoid causing any embarrassment to



CIA Director Casey

The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, meanwhile, was reported to be asking for more information on the cross-border operations. In the House of Representatives, Congressman Michael D. Barnes (D), of Maryland, head of the inter-American affairs subcommittee, has introduced a resolution which would ban such covert operations. Mr. Barnes said he did not think the resolution had much chance of passing, but thought it might serve as a warning to those in the administration who were proposing such operations.

According to insiders, the original idea for a covert action more often than not comes from the executive branch and not from the US Central Intelligence Agency itself. CIA officials feel they have been badly "burned" by public exposure of their past abuses. They are not eager to relive the controversies of the 1970s.

For the CIA to proceed with a covert action, the President must find that such an operation is important to national security.

This is the case even if the operation involves nothing more than planting an editorial in a foreign newspaper. Indeed, most covert actions consist precisely of this sort of thing, says one source. "Doing a little public relations," as he put it.

President Carter came to office sounding skeptical about secret CIA operations and seemed to have kept them to a minimum during the first part of his term. But frustration over the taking of hostages in Iran as well as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan caused the Carter administration to take another look at covert operations.

According to a number of sources, Mr. Carter then authorized an increase in such operations, particularly in the propaganda field.

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